

ON LETTING THE DIALECTIC GO

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ABSTRACT: Alfred North Whitehead's critique of modern naturalisms suggest that they betray reason by ignoring the vast extent and depth of the problematic of symbolism. This is partly borne out by the still unexplained fact that highly abstract systems of symbolism, as in mathematics, can throw light on the hidden workings of nature. But since these include ordinary perception itself, and since symbolisms always mediate between minds and nature, all reasonings about truth or reality elicit references to mysterious natural powers. Good reasoning in natural philosophy thus requires an artful dialectic which is primarily concerned not with exact analyses of meanings but rather with the element of creativity in their ongoing production. Such a dialectic must be based on a polar logic that is opposed to the modern tendency to treat fundamental conceptual contrasts, such as nature-culture, subject-object, matter-spirit, and so on, as separable.

KEYWORDS: Naturalism; Reason; Symbolism; Power; Creativity; Dialectic; Reality

That philosophy will forever be haunted by the immense problematic of symbolism, of how and why certain systems of symbolisms are capable of mediating effectively between minds and world, is well illustrated by the perennial puzzle of the applicability of mathematics. A. N. Whitehead provides a good idea of both the extent and depth of this puzzle when he remarks, for instance, that 'mathematics is the science of the most complete abstractions to which the human mind can attain.'¹ Noting in the same context that the impressive seventeenth century developments in science would have been impossible without mathematics, for it 'supplied the background of imaginative thought with which the men of science approached the observation of nature' (SMW, 30), he prompts the question of how imagination works in the search for true understanding. For he also claims that 'the truth sought in pure mathematics is necessary truth about the world.' The point is that, for all his great respect for the powers of mathematical symbolisms, he by no means subscribes to the view that mathematics is capable of providing a full understanding of concrete reality. More specifically, his reflections on science and mathematics suggest that some mathematical imaginations are capable of fastening upon high abstractions that are capable, some of them anyway, of limning the truth.

1. Alfred North Whitehead, *Science and the Modern World* (New York: Free Press, 1967), 34 (hereafter cited as *SMW*).

Such a belief in the cognitive powers of abstruse symbolisms is supported by, for instance, the remarkable achievements of quantum physicists in the last century. But by the same token, the controversial questions that arise with regard to the problem of how to best interpret some of the more ‘bizarre’ experimental results indicates that the ancient problem of the applicability of mathematics is but one branch of the vast and open problematic of symbolism.

To take the problematic of symbolism seriously is, in short, to acknowledge the giant question mark hovering over received views of what constitutes a truly rational explanation. The obscurity of the connections that appear to obtain, here and there, between minds and nature, gives rise to questions related to the kind and provenance of the mental powers presupposed by good symbolizing *tout court*. Despite a common tendency to ignore this crucial consideration, it is not hard to believe that the natural philosopher never reasons about nature pure and simple. Hence modern naturalists who center their deliberations on science can be charged with encouraging an endemic self-deception in so far as their quest for knowledge proceeds on the assumption that nature and culture can be totally separated.² This means that the first task of the nonmodern (or truly modern) naturalist is to look for an adequate means of expression capable of doing justice at once to nature, culture, and discourse. For the would-be naturalist who is inclined to believe in the existence of ‘truths’ if not *the Truth* must be primarily concerned not only with what it means to get something right about some aspect of an enveloping nature-culture but also with what word-symbols might best convey this understanding to other minds.

It is thus not a simple matter to decide where to begin either to criticize or to think about alternatives to currently dominant assumptions about the role of symbolisms in cognition. Inasmuch as there are many different cultures, and in so far as different cultures tend to privilege different modes of symbolizing, there may well be many many different forms of rational symbolization in a plurality of distinguishable nature-cultures.

1 ON THE NEED FOR AN ARTFUL DIALECTIC

Briefly, then, to assume that systematic argumentation grounded in standard logic can deal justly and effectively with the problematic of symbolism is question-begging of a high order. Whitehead in fact suggests that an overweening tendency to interpret rationality in terms of a logicistic dialectic has led to the poisoning of thought in this culture. His attempt to provide an antidote in the form of comprehensive naturalism can thus be understood as an exercise in cultural therapy for an unbalanced, indeed irrational, collective reason. Hence there can be no overestimating the size of the gulf that separates his interpretation of the rationalistic project from that of systematic thinkers, such as his former colleague, Bertrand Russell. It is thus a nice irony that Russell claims (in his famous lecture on ‘Vagueness’) that many more questions in philosophy than

2. See Bruno Latour (1991), *We Have Never Been Modern*, trans. Catherine Porter (Cambridge, Mass., Harvard University Press, 1993) who argues that a characteristic assumption of ‘the moderns’ is that nature can be totally separated from culture.

is generally acknowledged are connected with the problem of symbolism.³ Whitehead can thus be said to be fully in accord with this view, although for completely different reasons which, as it happens, Ludwig Wittgenstein brings out in his *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*. For his attempt to show that here is a commonality of logical structure between true propositions and actual states of affair actually leads him to the shocking (for ‘the moderns’) realization of the extreme poverty of a systematic (logico-analytic) dialectic.⁴

That is to say, to pursue those important questions of philosophy that relate to common aesthetic, ethical, and religious feelings is to run up against, sooner rather than later, the borders of the mystical. But if this is so, it may be impossible to over-estimate the extent of the difficulties presented by the problematic of symbolism. It is in any case worth noting that C. S. Peirce, who like Whitehead is a great believer in the cognitive powers of logic, mathematics, and science, was eventually forced, after an extensive inquiry into the logic of scientific discovery, to renounce his initial physiocistic prejudices. The successes of scientific reasoning testify to the indispensability of abductive (i.e. insightful) ‘guessing’ in fruitful hypothesizing. Maintaining furthermore that these successes show that the human mind is ‘akin to truth,’ Peirce herewith underscores the unavoidability of the question of the best way to conceive the relations between minds and nature.

It is thus not incidental that Whitehead holds that intuitions and insights provide the ultimate ground of a philosophy of nature. He also notes that the purpose of philosophy can only be to rationalize mysticism.⁵ However, not even his most sympathetic readers appear to have realized the radical implications of his concluding remarks on the task of philosophy and the function of reason. Indeed, when exploring the question what philosophers may learn from Whitehead, Victor Lowe states that “almost no one is really willing to *let the dialectic go*.”⁶ Since a reluctance to ‘let go’ can perhaps be discerned in some of Whitehead’s own metaphysical reasonings, it is necessary to begin very far back by asking what a ‘reasonable’ conception of reason might be. Yet it is not even possible to take this preliminary step without committing oneself to some general conception of the Function of Reason—which Whitehead (in a book of the same name) maintains is to promote the art of life. He thus implies that reason too is an art. This is because how we live affects how we think, and *vice versa*. Thus good reasoning in philosophy, he suggests, ultimately requires an artful dialectic.

As for the now burning question what such a dialectic might look like, it is at least clear from Whitehead’s extensive work in philosophy that one of his principal aims is to do proper justice to the multi-dimensionality of ‘concrete experience,’ which involves

3. That all the problems of philosophy touch on, if they are not already part of the vast problematic of symbolism, is a topic I explore more fully in my article “Symbolism: Or, The Organic Functioning of Reason” (forthcoming in *The Handbook of Whiteheadian Process Thought*, ed. M. Weber).

4. See, e.g., Frederick Sontag, *Wittgenstein and the Mystical: Philosophy as an Ascetic Practice* (Atlanta, Georgia: Scholars Press, 1995).

5. Alfred North Whitehead, *Modes of Thought* (New York: Free Press, 1968), 174.

6. Victor Lowe, ‘What Philosophers may learn from Whitehead’ (*Revue Internationale de Philosophie*, vol. 15, nos. 56-7, 1961, pp. 251-66), 254 (original emphasis).

an interplay of feelings, thoughts, instincts, insights, intuitions, and last, but far from least, imagination.⁷ Furthermore, ordinary life continually reminds us that change and becoming are salient deliverances of concrete experiencing. Whitehead can therefore claim a sound empirical basis for his approach to philosophy of nature which generally adheres to a Heraclitean view of the world. As for the powers that reason must deploy when trying to make sense of a restless flux of interconnected and overlapping events, the immense complexity of the situation indicates that the common complaint that Whitehead's unorthodox approach to metaphysics is short on arguments and long on appeals to metaphors is merely to beg a host of questions. Indeed, such wholesale begging is arguably a major symptom of the sickness that vitiates dominant conceptions of good reasoning, since the standard approach is reasonable just and only to the extent that the conception of rationality that currently dominates serious thinking in this culture is rational. That this is very far from the case is implicit in Whitehead's summary statement that the aim to rationalize mysticism depends on an astute fashioning of 'novel verbal characterizations.'

In other words, an honest attempt at 'rationalization' that is generally infused with desire for justice must be particularly fortunate in its choice of language since the meaning of rationality for Whitehead hinges on how one attempts to coordinate fundamental beliefs. More specifically, then, he can be read as illustrating the view that good reasoning in philosophy depends on an appropriate and insightful choice of guiding imagery; for it can be argued that only a truly insightful metaphors (or metaphysical imaginary) can provide reliable guide-posts for the movements of an artful reason.⁸ Thus his apparently eccentric use of anthropomorphic imagery in the development and expression of his philosophy of organism can be regarded as quintessentially rational in so far as human understanding ultimately depends on finding or mapping out an accessible and coherent ground of suggestive word-symbols.

The upshot is that the tendency of the moderns to blanch at the mere mention of mysticism is nothing but unthinking prejudice. Whitehead can only be accused of traducing the quest for a rational understanding of this complex and confusing world if it can be shown that the moderns have been right all along—that only a systematic, logistic dialectics is capable of underpinning a rational account of experience *tout court*.

2 IMAGINING AN ARTFUL REASON

But there are plenty of reasons for thinking that experience is inherently opaque to human reason, that the natural philosopher bent on clarifying Life and Thought is des-

7. That one of Whitehead's chief aims is to see justice done to the full range of experiencing is stressed by W. E. Hocking in "Whitehead On Mind and Nature," in *The Philosophy of Alfred North Whitehead*, ed. Paul Arthur Schilpp (New York, Tudor), 383-404.

8. I began to explore this crucial point in my *Myths of Reason: Vagueness, Rationality, and the Lure of Logic* (Atlantic Highlands, N.J., Humanities Press International, 1995). This discussion is more fully elaborated in *Process, Reality, and the Power of Symbols: Thinking with A. N. Whitehead* (Basingstoke, Hamps.: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007).

tined to wrestle with the mystical, for this may lie right under our noses, so to speak. This is because perception itself is inherently opaque to conscious thought—a consideration that is hardly new. It informs Descartes' observation, for example, that "that power by which we are properly said to know things, is purely spiritual."⁹ However he at the same time problematizes the idea of knowledge and truth inasmuch as the powers of reason (which for him are privy, as it were, to truth in the sense that some mathematical minds know how to read the book of nature) depend on how well the 'organs of spirit' (to use the philosopher-poet Samuel Taylor Coleridge's words) have been nurtured. This much neglected thinker in fact lends a good deal of support to Whitehead's decision to elevate the vague notions of power and spirit to a central position in his attempt to coordinate our most fundamental beliefs. For despite his own great respect for scientific method, he declares in the preface to *Science and the Modern World* that philosophy is 'the most effective of all the intellectual pursuits' just because it is 'the architect of the buildings of the spirit' (*SMW*, viii). Hinting that the best or most valuable intuitions, imaginings, and insights that philosophers contribute to philosophy stem from powers which are present throughout Nature, he praises in particular the insights of the so-called Romantic poets, such as Wordsworth and Shelley who, along with Bishop Berkeley, 'are representative of the intuitive refusal seriously to accept the abstract materialism of science' (*SMW*, 86).

Thus acknowledging the possibility that Nature is shot through with hidden powers which drive the restless flux of events, powers that need to be taken into account in order to do justice to both the material and spiritual sides of experiencing, Whitehead takes up a challenge that most would-be naturalists go to great lengths to avoid. How he proposes to deal with spirit's role in an artful reason can be partly inferred from his choice of perception as the key to understanding what holds the world together. Claiming (in *Process and Reality*) that Locke was right to suggest that the problem of perception and the problem of power are one and the same, he notes especially Locke's observation that the powers involved in perception are both active and passive.

Hence if one of Whitehead's most important insights is that a generalized conception of perception is the key to understanding what actually holds the flux of events together, he leads his readers to confront the possibility that perception refers at bottom to an insoluble mystery. In other words, when attempting to assess Whitehead's contributions to a broadly conceived naturalism, which takes the events of Nature just as seriously as those of Culture, one can interpret his rationalistic faith that the world is intelligible in the light of the restless interplay of active and passive powers that point to an ongoing working-out of a Heraclitan *Logos*.

This line of thought requires, however, that hosts of interconnected metaphysical questions be addressed all at once, as it were. One may ask, for instance, whether an elucidation of the flux of events calls for a conception of the mattering of matter that reflects or mimics the obscure powers exemplified by the rationalistic thinking of human beings. The difficulties raised by this question are compounded by the consideration that

9. See "Rules for the Direction of the Mind," *The Philosophical Works of Descartes*, Vol. I, trans. Elizabeth S. Haldane and G.R.T. Ross (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1972), 38.

in so far as good thinking or reasoning presupposes veridical perceptions, the manifest differences in types of animal sensibility point to a vast spectrum of degrees of sentient awareness in Nature that require call for a very general theory of experiencing.

So before trying to go further, it is necessary to stress that sentience must not be conflated with conscious awareness. As Whitehead repeatedly points out, self-consciousness is a highly evolved and rare form of sentience. On the other hand, his metaphysical imaginary indicates that the world can be generally depicted as a shifting network of interconnected, hierarchically organized, species of experience-events which are in various ways and degrees aware of each other.¹⁰ In other words, he opens the doors of natural philosophy, indeed of all philosophy, to the possibility that not only human mental intuitions and insights but also physical instincts, not to mention hidden acts of imagination (such as those that inform all acts of perception), have counterparts throughout Nature.

So to do him justice, one must begin by immediately renouncing the unwarranted modern presupposition that ontological questions can be treated independently from epistemological ones. Yet the complications noted above indicate that it is small wonder that the moderns chose to follow Descartes in attempting to reason about the flux of events in terms of two radically different kinds of 'stuff.' Without doubt it is much simpler to assume that the 'mattering of matter' is entirely mechanical, that one can even ignore or explain away the immaterial 'quicknesses' evoked by acts of mind. Indeed, it is just this suppression of 'quickness,' Whitehead is in effect maintaining, that has had the most pernicious effect on reason in this techno-scientific culture which has embraced a distorted, self-serving conception that protects and promotes a materialistic imaginary which is more on the side of Death than Life.¹¹

A full recovery from the modern betrayal of reason (which calls for a reconciliation of empiricist and rationalist ideals), Whitehead is in effect maintaining, requires a whole-hearted acceptance of the need for a radically nonmodern conception of substance; this requires, however, a prior cultural therapy inasmuch as the moderns have poisoned thought by opening up a gulf between ontology and epistemology.

Attempting to bridge this gulf, Samuel Taylor Coleridge thus stands out as an important contributor to the art of cultural therapy. He explicitly aims to defend a 'true naturalism' in which the connective power which holds subjects and objects together is provided by a primordial form of imagination which he calls primary. At the same time, he posits secondary and tertiary forms of imagination, where the latter is called fancy. Despite being the most common (and consciously deployed) form of imagination, fancy

10. In *SMW* Whitehead cites with approval some observations of Francis Bacon to the effect that matter really matters; that is, matter refers at bottom to sentient entities capable of deciding to embrace or reject particular influences streaming from other entities.

11. This sort of criticism is echoed, for instance, by Friedrich Nietzsche's attack on the 'Egyptianism' of modern thought which, arguably on account of an neurotic fear of change and becoming, has led to the entrenchment of a 'conceptual idolatry' that vitiates a good deal of modern philosophy. See, e.g., Arran Gare, 'Mathematics, Explanation, and Reductionism: Exposing the Roots of the Egyptianism of European Civilization,' in *Cosmos and History: Journal of Natural and Social Philosophy* at <www.cosmosandhistory.org>.

is the least significant since it enters into play only belatedly—after more primordial or primary acts of imagination which underpin reason proper have done their work and thought has been furnished with the ‘fixities and definites’ that it manipulates.

That fancy usually plays with distorted products of a moribund Reason is evident in materialistic modes of thought that are subservient to what Coleridge calls the ‘despotism of the eye’—the doctrine that the only legitimate sources of knowledge are the ‘organs of sense’. Under the aegis of this doctrine, modern philosophers promote a nihilistic view of nature as devoid of hidden or living powers. The upshot is that a one-sided modern reason has been given license to perpetuate the self-serving myth that an adequate understanding of ‘minding’ can be achieved without needing to take into account the spiritual dimension of thought.

It is thus highly significant that Coleridge indicates that a nonmodern dialectic ought to adhere above all to what he calls a ‘polar logic.’ Rejecting, for example, the tendency to separate the conscious from the unconscious dimensions of thought, he calls in effect for an essentially nonmodern principle of rationality which holds that while it is reasonable to distinguish for the purposes of analysis, it is fatal in philosophy to sharply divide the results. Thus Coleridge also implies that a good part of the task of the would-be true naturalist is therapeutic in nature; for it must first seek a way to overcome the modern tendency to institute false conceptual divisions which in one way or another drive a wedge between matter and mind, body and spirit, and so on.

Thus in Coleridge’s view, the hallmark of a true dialectic that is guided by a polar logic would be an ability to justly integrate the ‘organs of sense’ with the ‘organs of spirit,’ for it is only out of such happy conjunctions that truly rational thinking arises.¹² However, if one assumes that he is right on this crucial point, and also that primary imagination is (if only on occasion) capable of grasping aspects of reality, reason in practice is still obliged to call upon secondary (or ‘poetic’) imagination to lift the products of primary imagination into the light of day in the form of symbols. Coleridge can thus be read as outlining the skeleton of a theory of symbolism that only promises to import justice into philosophy’s traditional quest for wisdom and good sense.

3 ACTUALITY VS. REALITY

To sum up the story so far, if both Life and Thought must be viewed first and last as real or concrete aspects of Nature, as both Coleridge and Whitehead insist, a true naturalism calls for an artful dialectic governed by a polar logic. Such a logic must aim to reconcile opposing or complementary notions that in one way or another illuminate the complex relations between living and thinking. That is to say, the contrast of subjects and objects, for example, must be viewed first and last as indissociable. An adequate polar logic is therefore nothing like Aristotelian logic; it elicits a third factor, or dynamic

12. See Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Biographia Literaria*, ed. George Watson (London: J. M. Dent, 1956), 139 (hereafter referred to as BL): ‘all the organs of sense are framed for a corresponding world of sense; and we have it. All the organs of spirit are framed for a correspondent world of spirit: tho’ the latter organs are not developed in all alike. But they exist in all, and their first appearance discloses itself in the moral being.’

agency, which bridges the blurry divide between the vague poles of fundamental contrasts. This third factor, or 'active agency,' thus recalls the creative faculty of imagination which the early Kant posits in the first edition of *The Critique of Pure Reason*. For he holds that experience presupposes a synthesizing activity that he describes as a 'blind but indispensable function of the soul,' thus bringing to the foreground of metaphysics the question of whether an artful dialectic constrained only by a polar logic requires an artful means to fit imaginative souls into Nature. For souls may be best conceived as representatives of a Spirit that cannot be divorced from Nature, which implies that Spirit may preside only more or less reasonably over individual acts of world-making—in keeping with the state of development of the relevant organs of spirit.

The question of what it means to be reasonable, in brief, leads to intricately intertwined personal, political, and cosmic questions related to the moral or ethical as well as the aesthetic and spiritual dimensions of experiencing. So inasmuch as the problematics of reason and experience stand at the center of philosophical inquiry, if only implicitly, and in so far as one grants (with Coleridge and the early Kant) that there can be no experience without the intervention of imagination, it is not hard to think that mysticism is never far away. Yet it does not follow that silence is the only reasonable response to every encounter with the mystical. For the principal challenge that this complex and confusing world presents to philosophers is to frame an adequate imaginary that can do justice to the most salient aspects of experiencing. It is thus worth reiterating that only an imaginative appeal to even deeper intuitions than those mentioned above can undermine this sketch of the problematic of reason. Absent such an intuition, it seems that the only reasonable course is to look for a way to fit imagination into the naturing of nature. But it is doubtful whether Coleridge gets very far with his ambitious plan to demonstrate the truth of his theory of imagination. He rather points up the need for a theory of actuality capable of illuminating the living powers in Nature.

It is just such a theory that Whitehead proffers. Indeed, his magnum opus, *Process and Reality*, might just as well have been entitled *Process and Actuality* since it provides, among other things, a way to think about reality without falling prey to the tempting idea of monolithic Being. Furthermore, his Heraclitean presupposition that Being and Becoming refer to complementary themes leads him to insist that bodies, minds, and souls are all intimately involved in the construction of experience. This implies that a true naturalism will stand or fall not only on whether it can show how individual occasions of sensibility can arise in the first place but also how they interact with each other.

Hence one of Whitehead's most important insights into the nature of actuality is that an actual event is like a 'drop of experience' and is thus exemplary of both becoming and perishing. This intuitive claim, which forms part of the basis of his metaphysical imaginary, points up the question of how best to model an actual entity. In keeping with his general assumption that all aspects of experiencing can be subsumed under the metaphor of process, it may be asked whether a living (and dying) body provides the best model for an actual event, a question that is surely both urgent and intelligible for any person inclined to think of him/herself as an actual entity that, having been

borne, is destined to perish. Such a person is also likely to agree with Whitehead that all experiencing has both an active and a passive side, as is regularly evidenced by the interdependence of memory and anticipation in ordinary perception. He/she may even be prepared to admit that there is a great variety of types of experience-events in the animal world that bear witness to an immense array of hidden, internal creative powers which vary from individual to individual and species to species.

Nothing in fact stands in the way of regarding ordinary experience as generally illustrating a Janus-faced activity in which 'raw material' is continually being 'shaped' by internal powers. The Whiteheadian kaleidoscope of experience-events thus recalls Peirce's key insight, that the universe 'is perfused with signs, if it is not composed exclusively of signs.'¹³ The important point here is that, given the importance currently accorded to the interpretative and perspectival aspects of cognitive activity, it does not require too great a leap of imagination to think that the 'shaping' work done in experiencing is chiefly concerned with interpreting relentless floods of signs and symbols. Or, in other words, that a Heraclitean world consisting of a flux of experience-events can be depicted as a grand semiosis involving processes within processes that include hierarchically organized interpretative networks in which signs, signals, and symbols are somehow invested with meanings.

That is to say, individual organisms can be understood as specialized sign-interpreters, or problem-solvers, whose continuing existence depends on keeping up a certain expertise in the interpretation of signs. In this organo-semiotic imaginary, then, it would be nonsense to cling to the ideal of perfect, complete, or exact knowledge, let alone the idea of a pure reason, for a sign in Peirce's theory of semiotics is the carrier only of potential meaning. That is, a sign conveys only a certain vague possibility. Signs and symbols are thus of the nature of provocations that may or may not be responded to properly.

But while the value-shorn world of the nihilistic moderns is hereby reinvested with meaning, nothing guarantees the production of good sense in the form of truly appropriate meanings. Hence one can say that meaning-making according to the terms of this imaginary is only more or less responsible. Once again the figure of Heraclitus looms large, for he suggestively reminds us that eyes and ears are bad witnesses if they are employed by souls who do not understand their language. That this is a language of signs and symbols seems moreover implicit in his cryptic reference to the oracle at Delphi who communicates only by means of signs. Hence it is possible that good interpretations are in touch with the *Logos*, provided that the relevant souls have learned how to develop their interpretative powers appropriately.

In the particular case of human semioses, then, it is conceivable that something like Coleridge's 'secondary' imagination, which is an 'echo' of primary imagination and which might just as well be called poetic, reflects a more or less well nurtured organ of spirit. In any case, this form of imagination may be the key to understanding perception

13. CP 5.448n. The remark accompanies (in a footnote) a number of observations concerning the essentially semiotic character of communication.

tout court. Indeed, Coleridge's essentially nonmodern approach to philosophy resonates strongly with Whitehead's theory of perception in which he posits two basic modes (causal efficacy and presentational immediacy) that are linked by what he calls symbolic referencing—or 'organic functioning'. Furthermore, this sort of functioning would appear to depend upon an imaginative agency which is capable of turning images into symbols, and vice versa.

Hence it is conceivable that a true naturalism can be grounded in a Whiteheadian view of actual entities modelled by ensouled bodies, for these can provide the locales of the living souls that Kant elicits and whose functioning is necessary for there to be experience in the first place. And in so far as this functioning is akin to human imagination, which is an indispensable creative agency whose work can be only partially subsumed under explicit rules, it is also conceivable that the whole world is shot through with imaginative agencies akin to Coleridge's primary imagination. It is held together, moreover, by acts of perception that ultimately provide a meaning for truth. For this hoary idea refers at bottom to perspicacious acts of symbolizing which stem from discriminating, well-cultivated souls who have learned how to balance deadening habits with the latent creative powers of imagination. This is because the world is not made anew following the perishing of actual entities; it is rather being made and remade in ongoing adjustments of habits that illustrate only temporarily resolved tensions between the freedom of imagination and the constraints imposed by extant habits of interpretation.

4 A REALITY OF SYMBOLS

This brief sketch of a nonmodern rationalist-empiricist naturalism indicates, at the very least, there can be no underestimating the revolutionary consequences of a wholehearted rejection of modern, science-centered naturalisms that inform at present dominant conceptions of reason and rationality. It indicates, for instance, that the imaginal ought to come before the conceptual in every philosophical analysis of the genesis of experience. Perhaps all valuable mental activity *begins* with a mysterious precipitation by more or less well-cultivated souls of more or less significant images. This implies that a good many assumptions of standard or modern approaches to thinking about thought itself need to be turned on their heads, as Whitehead and Coleridge (with much help from Kant and Peirce) in fact show. These dissenters from modernity can also be read as proffering the outlines of a truly modern (or radically nonmodern) naturalism with a Platonistic core. For it is also conceivable that certain symbolisms are directly, albeit secretly, in touch with the realm of ideas.¹⁴

But perhaps the most important implication for cultural therapy of this line of thought is that the time-worn notion of an 'external reality' can finally be put to rest, for it seems much less misleading to speak of a 'reality of symbols.' This substitution is

14. Coleridge maintains, for instance, that "an idea in the *highest* sense of that word, cannot be conveyed but by a *symbol*." Quoted by Owen Barfield, in *What Coleridge Thought* (Middletown, Conn.: Wesleyan University Press, 1971), 117. For a good discussion of Coleridge's views on symbolism, see Raimonda Modena, *Coleridge and the Concept of Nature* (London, MacMillan, 1985).

in fact explicitly urged by Wolfgang Pauli who, as one of the principal founders of the Copenhagen Interpretation in quantum mechanics, stresses the radical nature of the consequences of accepting the indissociability of subjects and objects in trying to make sense of an act of observation—for he maintains that every such account must enlist ‘irrational’ elements; for want, he says, of a better word.¹⁵

Briefly then, Pauli’s physics-inspired evocation of a ‘reality of symbols’ resonates strongly with an organo-semiotic interpretation of the Cosmos. This key phrase in fact promises a resolution of the misbegotten divorce of science and religion—or perhaps better, Nature and Spirit, for souls can be regarded as worldly representatives of Spirit. In other words, the above sketch of a ‘reality of symbols’ outlines a means to rescue Spirit from its unjust banishment from ‘serious’ thinking since it points the way to a unified (i.e. epistemological-ontological) metaphysics that does not pit idealism against realism. Furthermore, instead of tying the meaning of knowledge to a fixed, monolithic reality, acts of knowing can be elucidated in terms of a ‘symbolic constructivism’ which links the processes of cognition to only more or less perspicacious interpretations of signs and symbols.

It is thus worth noting that for Peirce a symbol refers to the cultural side of sense-making since its meaning is established by consensus. The above organo-semiotic imaginary can therefore at least hope to do justice to the open-endedness of the human problematic of symbolism since it is fully amenable to an undivided and evolving nature-culture. Furthermore, while confirming that the sort of therapy this culture desperately requires revolves about language-use, as the later Wittgenstein claims, this imaginary reveals that the real difficulty is not to show the fly the way out of the fly-bottle of misbegotten ideas and concepts. It rather shows that the real difficulty concerns the intimate and shifting relations between symbols and images. Indeed, as Whitehead points out, every act of reasoning involves complicated chains of derivation of symbol from symbol. There is moreover no warrant for thinking that there are components of experience which can be identified as pure symbols or pure meanings. But perhaps even more importantly, it allows for a complete ‘letting go’ of the standard dialectic since the problem of how to reason well can now be closely related (in keeping with actual practice) to the task of developing an appropriate language with which to express and communicate whatever strikes us as both important and interesting in the evolving relationships between signs, word-symbols, images, concepts, and meanings.

This means that the philosopher need not abandon all hope of getting something right. This is because an artful dialectic is closer kin to the free imaginative play of poets (or artists in general) than the rule-governed thinking of ‘hard-nosed’ scientists. Indeed, the very existence of art in every culture is a sign that one can best learn about the interplay of natural signs and cultural symbols in the inexhaustible realm of art. But without doubt, this does not resolve the difficulty in defining good philosophy, for as every art critic is well aware it is hardly a simple matter to define good art.

15. See K. V. Laurikainen, *Beyond the Atom: The Philosophical Thought of Wolfgang Pauli* (Berlin, Springer-Verlag, 1985).

Reverting, then, to the initial question of how to account for the remarkable efficaciousness of highly abstruse systems of symbolism in mathematical physics, this limited problem-area perhaps provides the best way to see that progress in understanding depends on an artful reason capable of attaining to direct intuitions as well as perspicacious imaginings. Coleridge claims as much when he states that thinking in philosophy should proceed ‘from the most original construction or first productive act of the inner sense.’ But when he illustrates this claim by evoking a geometer who, when drawing a line, effectively renders visible a hidden act of imagination,¹⁶ he reminds us that subsequent developments in mathematics illustrate Whitehead’s hint that mathematicians are primarily ‘immersed’ in highly abstract theories, not in the concrete world.¹⁷ It therefore seems best to speak of their contributions to the advance of mathematical theory in terms of intuitive imaginings, especially since a good deal of modern mathematics appears to have little or no direct connection to actual events.

5 WHAT, THEN, IS AN ARTFUL DIALECTIC?

To sum up, the problem of how to navigate a ‘reality of symbols’ may be compared to the problem of judging the worth of the intuitive imaginings of ‘modern’ artists who eschew traditional forms of representation in favour of free-ranging, if not anarchic, productions of ‘objects’ of contemplation. Artists may provide, in other words, as good a reason as can be found for thinking that an artful dialectic must revolve around certain feelings of ‘rightness.’ This implies that good thinking depends on a careful nurturing of the affective dimension of thought when attempting to cultivate imagination—a dimension that inevitably renders such a dialectic incommensurable with any dialectic based on formal logic. But this observation does not erase the manifest differences between art and philosophy, for the argumentative (and hence partially discursive) nature of philosophical discourse will remain for as long as reason retains a moral or ethical dimension. That is, for as long as the ways we live affect and are affected by the ways we think.

Briefly, then, an artful dialectic need only renounce once and for all the illusory modern dream of an objective, politically neutral reason. The conclusion is therefore that the sort of therapy that the nonmodern philosopher should aim to provide ought to concentrate on ways in which a culture’s collective imagination in all its multi-dimensionality might best be nurtured.

So among all the profound questions the would-be naturalist is obliged to confront, perhaps the most important are those which pertain to education, such as how to teach the difference between right and wrong. Here the philosopher may have important contributions to make in clarifying the difference between truth and error. In this context,

16. BL, 143. It is thus noteworthy that Peirce makes a similar observation in respect to the experimental nature of mathematical research.

17. ‘Mind is inside its images, not its images inside the mind: I am ‘immersed in a topic’ in mathematics, not the reverse. We are actors in scenes, not the scenes inside us’ (quoted from memory by W. E. Hocking, “Whitehead On Mind and Nature,” in *The Philosophy of Alfred North Whitehead*,” ed. Paul Arthur Schilpp (New York, Tudor), 1951), 385.

then, let us briefly consider, the musings of Gilles Deleuze who claims that the culture of the West perpetuates a self-serving misconstrual of error that stems from a ‘dogmatic image’ of thought that ‘crushes’ the essence of thought, which is movement. In other words, he holds that the moderns systematically traduce and arrest thinking whenever they trace error solely to external influences, thereby passing over the equally, if not more, important internal sources of error (e.g., madness, malevolence, and stupidity).¹⁸

Thus Deleuze stresses the centrality of the problem of learning in philosophy, together with the fact that things here are as likely to go wrong as right. To this end, he insists that a doctrine of faculties is ‘an entirely necessary component of the system of philosophy’ (DR, 143). Furthermore, a faculty refers to a mental capacity to make sense of a certain kind; that is, it alludes to a ‘transcendental operation’ that evokes a living power which is latent at birth and which may or may not be properly developed as the organism matures. Such a power is moreover ‘transcendental’ in the sense that they it can draw meanings peculiar to its own passions from the realm of Ideas.

Deleuze thus sketches the outlines of a complex, semi-platonic, vitalistic (i.e., anti-nihilistic) Platonism that resonates in many respects with that envisaged by Whitehead and Coleridge. The most significant point of commonality concerns the overarching fundamental polar contrast of transcendence-immanence—for Deleuze also holds that the Idea is immanent. Holding moreover that the passions inherent in transcendental operations of a faculty bespeak only a capacity to draw meanings from a reservoir of virtual meanings, he indicates that both Peirce and Whitehead are right to insist on the ‘firstness’ of feelings in their respective metaphysics. So in so far as all mental activity depends on the imaginal, which involves a mysterious precipitation by souls of images, the ongoing production of sense in the world, which may be both good and bad, floats on a shifting bed of percepts and affects. Put another way, the Heraclitean flux of events refers to a restless production of occasions of sensibility involving complexes of partially free, partially constrained capacities for making sense. The great variety of modes of experiencing in Nature thus bespeaks a plurality of more or less well-cultivated souls that arguably bear witness to what Nietzsche calls a World of the Will. That is, Nature refers to, among other things, many little wills exercised by intercommunicating and ensouled bodies—for where could faculties dwell if not in willing, feeling, ensouled bodies? The Heraclitean flux of events can thus be imaged as an immensely complicated cosmic dance of contemplations in which Reason proper refers to a great range of contemplating souls capable of participating to some degree in an evolving *Logos*.¹⁹

But it is just this last step that may arouse the strongest objections from close adherents to Whitehead’s theory of organism (as this is set forth in *Process and Reality*) who wish to preserve his dictum that there is only one species of actual entity. Yet this key

18. See Gilles Deleuze (1968), *Difference and Repetition*, trans. Paul Patton (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994) (hereafter cited as DR)

19. This dynamic image is therefore especially conducive to a modelling of actual events by living bodies. As for the epistemological uncertainty implicit in this image, this seems neatly captured by W. B. Yeats thus: ‘O chestnut tree, great rooted blossomer,/Are you the leaf, the blossom, or the bole?/O body swayed to music, O brightening glance,/How can we know the dancer from the dance?’

assumption arguably represents an unfortunate carry-over from the modern presupposition that the whole of reality can be accounted for in terms of an elementary basis of sub-microscopic physical 'event-particles.' Hence insofar as one aims for a thoroughly nonmodern Whiteheadian metaphysics, a complete letting go of the dialectic calls for a modelling of actual entities on living, ensouled bodies.

However, the question of how to conceive actuality must remain endlessly controversial, for a rationalization of mysticism can result in an only more or less plausible story. As for the possible objection that the above story departs too radically from *Process and Reality*, the image of the world as composed of a restless cosmic dance of occasions of sensibility is at least in agreement with many of Whitehead's insights into the meaning and effects of symbolism. He explicitly ties the general character of an actual thing, for instance, to *how* it relates to other things; that is, to how it acts on and reacts to other actual things.²⁰ Hence if an actual event is viewed as a living (and dying), only more or less localized occasion of sensibility, an actual entity bespeaks an ever-changing, never self-identical self. And a world composed of such fleeting selves entails a flux of more or less passionate participants in an immense artful dialectic which is ultimately characterized by risk and adventure.

As for the quality of human contemplations, this must depend on good learning for which there can never be a method; indeed, learning, according to Deleuze, takes place in the unconscious wherein a certain complicity sometimes arises between nature and minds. As for the question whether 'complicity' is synonymous with 'truth,' an answer in keeping with the overarching character of immanence-transcendence indicates that the quality of whatever sense is actually being made in this world must be closely bound up with the quality of the functioning of the faculties involved. And such functioning ultimately depends on the degree of cultivation of the souls involved.

I am suggesting, in sum, that when the world is viewed under the aegis of the metaphor of Process, it can also be interpreted as a cosmic Adventure of Ideas in which every actual event, or actual entity, exemplifies a particular form of sentience. Furthermore, if the selective activity presupposed by all acts of interpretation of intrinsically vague signs and symbols presupposes a power of decision, as Deleuze in fact maintains, one can say with him that 'all is contemplation.' For if the meanings that can be drawn from the Idea are only virtual, every act of meaning-making must presuppose a possibly fallacious decision. But the ineliminable factor of error merely reflects the fact that all sentient beings involved in the business of making sense are immersed in an ongoing struggle to resolve the ever-changing tensions between habit and creativity.

6 MYSTICISM VS. MYSTIFICATION

The thoroughly nonmodern character of this highly speculative story shows at the

20. See *Symbolism: its meaning and effects* (New York: Macmillan, 1959): 'Every actual thing is something by reason of its activity' (26). Again, a living organism, such as an experiencing man, is at any particular moment 'but one occasion of his experience. Such an occasion, or act...is the most concrete actual entity, and the life of man from birth to death is a historic route of such occasions' (27).

very least that it is possible to construct a reasonable alternative to the delusory quest for a perfectly objective account of a reality capable of being rendered transparent by a systematically purified reason. More specifically, it calls into question the currently popular idea that the puzzle of consciousness awaits only an ingenious scientific solution. If one pursues the fundamental problem of perception far enough, the natural philosopher is bound to run up against the borders of the mystical. Nothing but blind faith (or a powerful myth) supports the scientific belief that everything worth explaining is amenable to scientific methods. Such a faith in fact indicates that this culture's way of dealing with the large themes as Life and Thought is urgently in need of philosophical therapy.

Indeed, Deleuze draws special attention to Nietzsche's attempt to outline 'an absolute anti-dialectics' that exposes 'all the mystifications that find a final refuge in the dialectic.'²¹ He at the same time suggests that the greatest source of mystification is that which is promoted by modern philosophers who, as self-styled, 'hard-headed' dialecticians, force their choices of problems and solutions to conform to the rules of logic. Yet it is merely a 'philosophical illusion,' says Deleuze, to hold that good problems can be traced from propositions.

Thus bringing into question standard conceptions of philosophy's task, Deleuze suggests that a philosopher can only aspire to make a significant contribution to a vast *collage*, perhaps in the form of an astute question or two. Or perhaps (I have argued) in the form of a figurative embellishment of an extant imaginary. For the above discussion indicates that learning how to do good philosophy requires a long apprenticeship in learning the art of problems and questions.²² The trouble is, as Deleuze also makes clear, there is no way to determine exactly what is or is not a good problem-Idea.

So one arrives in the end at the need to recognize that both intuition and insight, which may well involve an instinctive feel for good imagery, are essential in trying to account for good philosophy. It is thus not insignificant that Pauli the exacting and highly critical mathematical physicist acquired a deep interest in the intuitive musings of pre-modern scientists, such as the much maligned alchemists. Indeed, Vine Deloria claims that modern physics has merely brought this culture (or returned it) to 'precisely the point where the non-Western peoples began.'—that is, to the point of seeing that all inquiry must begin with a refusal 'to allow artificial divisions of subject-object, mind-matter, and space-time to lead us astray.'²³ This refusal to divide involves a rejection of the modern tendency to divorce the individuality [of the embodied psyche] from its complementary personality, which means (according to the above discussion) that the 'primitives' begin more reasonably than the moderns with a recognition that the soul [as a unit of spiritual activity] is an ineliminable element of the experiencing organism.

21. (Gilles Deleuze, *Nietzsche & Philosophy* (1962), trans. Hugh Tomlinson (New York: Columbia University Press, 1983), 195.

22. Deleuze stresses the importance of preserving 'a difference in kind between problems and propositions' (DR 162). Furthermore, propositions 'whether general or particular, find their sense only in the subjacent problem which inspires them.' Again, '[o]nly the Idea or problem is universal. It is not the solution which lends its generality to the problem, but the problem which lends its universality to the solution' (DR, 162).

23. Vine Deloria, Jr., *The Metaphysics of Modern Existence* (New York: Harper and Row, 1979), 39.

Deloria also stresses the point that ‘primitive’ modes of thought generally seek to do justice to all sides of Life and Thought. Despite the common view that primitive cultures illustrate inferior forms of rationality, their attempts to bring order into their understandings of the world do not proceed from the irrational assumption that nature and culture can be treated independently of one another. Furthermore, indigenous peoples typically reason in accordance with the assumption that they live in a ‘moral universe’ shot through with values. It is therefore significant that, as Deloria puts it, once one has gone beyond the stereotypical reading of the knowledge of non-Western cultures as ‘pre-scientific’ (on account of an inability to conceive abstract general principles and concepts), the ‘primitive’ tends to view every sentient being as ‘part of a larger process of interaction that can only be described as incorporating relationships of personal quality with nature to produce knowledge’ (p. 37).

In conclusion, then, only prejudice stands in the way of conceiving good philosophy in terms of good metaphysical imaginaries that can foster the production of genuine knowledge in the form of real insights and intuitions that pertain to every aspect of living and thinking. The overriding importance of intuition in knowledge-making is in fact neatly summed up in a saying that Deloria attributes to an old Sioux medicine man: ‘if you think about it, you will see that it is true.’²⁴ Indeed, if one stops to ponder the etymological meaning of contemplation, which alludes to a search for a special space or temple for ‘looking,’ the above sketch of an artful dialectic indicates that it is at least reasonable to hope that learning how to ‘look’ may lead one at times to the production of good sense. But the art of looking can be well- or ill-performed in accordance with the degree of cultivation of the vital powers of imagination. This means that there is no such thing as perfectly good sense and that it is only partially true to say, with Peirce, that the human mind is akin to truth.

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24. This quotation appears in the title of a paper by Vine Deloria Jr. in *ReVision*, vol. 18, winter 1996. My thanks to Jonathan Code for this reference. It is worth stressing that the sort of thinking being alluded to presupposes a ‘moral universe’: ‘The real interest of the old Indians was not to discover the abstract structure of physical reality but rather to find the proper road along which, for the duration of a person’s life, individuals were supposed to walk’ (p. 39).

